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GALI AND RODRIGUEZ CERMENHO: EXPLORATION
OF CALIFORNIA

CHARLES E. CHAPMAN

Drake's voyage to the Pacific in 1579 awakened Spain to a realization of the danger she ran of losing large portions of her empire. Never before had she encountered competition along the western shores of the Americas, and her only thought there had been to extend her domain in the direction of lands that promised quick returns in wealth. To be sure, Rodríguez Cabrillo and other leaders had sought the mysterious though actually non-existent northern strait called "Anián" in order to forestall foreign occupation, but the principal ideal during most of the first century after the discovery of America had been that of remunerative conquest, rather than defence. The expedition of Drake may fairly be said to have caused a change in Spanish colonial policy and the introduction of a new spirit which was to be the dominant note for another two hundred years. Henceforth Spain indeed sought rich lands, though more and more inclined to insist on proof before undergoing the expense of conquest, but fear of foreign danger began to take the principal place in her calculations for an extension of the sphere under her control. Expansion in order to insure the safety of her already occupied dominions, the policy of what may be termed the "aggressive defensive," became the keynote in Spain's activities along her colonial borders.

No region that she then possessed was so valuable to her as the kingdom of New Spain and none of the mainland countries was so exposed to European attack. Spain learned, thus early in her career, that the Californias, extending down through the eight hundred-mile peninsula to Cape San Lucas, constituted a grave danger if they should fall into the hands of an enemy, for they lay conveniently near a great part of the west coast of New Spain. It was natural, therefore, that she should wish to occupy the Californias, even though the effort should occasion considerable expense and though the expected riches should not develop.

The Spanish ambassador in England sent home reports about Drake's project for a second voyage to the Pacific. What action the Spanish government took has not yet been revealed, but it is

clear that the viceroys of this period displayed an unusually great interest in the Californias, with a view to making Spanish establishments there. This interest was heightened by rumors that Drake had discovered the strait and sailed through it.

On top of all this came a report from Francisco de Gali, commander of the Manila galleon of 1584, that he had encountered evidences of the strait in his voyage of that year. According to the account of this voyage by Fernández de Navarette,¹ Gali sailed three hundred leagues east and northeast of Japan

and found open deep sea, with currents from the north and north-west which were not diverted by the wind, whatever its violence or direction, until, having sailed seven hundred leagues, he reached the coast of New Spain, where he no longer observed the currents or the depth of sea previously met with. This gave Gali the idea that the strait between Tartary, or northern Asia, and New Spain was in the region of the currents. He also encountered on all his seven hundred league voyage a great number of whales, tunny-fish, albicore, and *bonitos*, which are fish usually found in channels where there are currents. These circumstances confirmed him the more in his belief that the much talked of strait was in that vicinity.

On this occasion, too, Gali passed along the Alta California coast. The narrative of the voyage, as translated in Bancroft, after telling what had happened in the earlier stages of its sailing, went on to say that

being by the same course upon the coast of New Spain under $37^{\circ} 30'$, we passed by a very high and fair land with many trees, wholly without snow, and four leagues from the land you find thereabout many drifts of roots, leaves of trees, reeds, and other leaves, like fig-leaves, the like whereof we found in great abundance in the country of Japan, which they eat; and some of those that we found, I caused to be sodden with flesh, and being sodden, they eat like coleworts; there likewise we found great store of seals; whereby it is to be presumed and certainly to be believed, that there are many rivers, bays and havens along by those coasts to the haven of Acapulco. From thence we ran south-east, south-east and by south, and south-east and by east, as we found the wind, to the point called Cabo de San Lucas, which is the beginning of the land of California, on the north-west side, lying under 22° , being five hundred leagues distant from Cape Mendocino.

¹In 1802, in his introduction to the narrative of the voyage of the *Sutil* and *Mexicana*, which went north in 1792 to prove once for all the truth or falsity of the reports about the strait.

This account is an interesting indication that other Spanish ships had passed along the Alta California coast as far north as Cape Mendocino between the time of Ferrelo in 1543 and Gali in 1584, though no record has come down to us. Ferrelo did not apply the name in 1543, and yet it is mentioned casually in 1584 by Gali, who did not see it on his voyage and who refers to it as one would to a place long since known and named. Of more immediate consequence, however, is the interest that the viceroy of New Spain displayed in Gali's story. Gali himself was a man of more than ordinary attainments and therefore his views were regarded as worthy of credence. The archbishop-viceroy, Pedro de Moya, said of him "that he was the best trained and most distinguished man in Mexico, and that in regard to cosmography and the art of navigation he could compete with the most select minds of Spain." Gali was asked about the advisability of establishing a settlement in some California port, which might serve both as a way-station for the galleon and as a base for obtaining further information of northern lands. There can be little doubt, too, that the element of foreign danger, of which Drake's voyage had been a forcible reminder, was influential in the viceroy's plans. Moya wrote to the king, strongly urging the need of discovering and occupying a port on the Alta California coast, and intimated that he was about to send Gali again to the Philippines, with orders to explore and make maps of the coasts of Japan, the islands of the Armenian (as the islands later styled Rica de Oro and Rica de Plata were sometimes called), and the Californias. It seems probable that the voyage was not made, as no evidence of it has come to light. At any rate, Moya's successor, the Marqués de Villamanrique, was clearly out of sympathy with the project. In May, 1585, five months before he reached New Spain to take over the government of the vice royalty, Villamanrique expressed his opinion that though no settlements had been made in the Californias the ships from the Philippines had not suffered any inconvenience for the lack of them. He seems not to have considered the matter from the standpoint of foreign danger, however. Upon his arrival in New Spain it is likely that the plan was dropped.

If the new viceroy felt that there was no reason for anxiety over foreign incursions into the Pacific he was soon rudely disillu-

sioned. In 1586 Thomas Cavendish had set sail from England with three ships, of respectively, 120, 60, and 40 tons, and with 123 men. Entering the Pacific in 1587, he sailed north, ravaging the coasts of Peru and New Spain and capturing many ships. Learning that the galleon was soon expected—the richest prize of all!—he betook himself with his two remaining ships to the Bay of San Bernabé at Cape San Lucas in the Californias. On November 4, 1587, the galleon of that year, the *Santa Ana*, a 700 ton ship, laden with rich silks and other cargo, besides 122,000 *pesos* in gold, hove into sight. Cavendish gave battle, and after a desperate fight took the prize. He thereupon transferred to his own ships what he wanted of her cargo, burned the galleon, and set sail for England. With one of his ships, he got across the Pacific, and eventually around the world to England. The survivors of the *Santa Ana* found that enough remained of the hulk for them to make their way in it to Acapulco.

Now, more than ever, it seemed clear that something must be done about occupying the Californias, for it was there that the foreign ships had the best opportunity to lie in wait for the galleon which was such an important element in the economic life of New Spain. If action were not taken, then the achievements of Drake and Cavendish would serve as an alluring inducement to others. The worst of it was, that a mere handful of men seemed capable of upsetting Spain's security in the Pacific. Steps were taken, therefore, to discover a northern port along the California coast where the galleon might receive notice whether the seas were clear and perhaps the escort of a well armed vessel.

In 1591 Luis de Velasco, who had succeeded Villamanrique as viceroy in 1590, wrote to the king that it was necessary to discover and survey the ports of the Californias, if the Philippine ships were to be adequately protected. Orders were therefore sent from Spain, in 1593, for such a survey to be made in course of a voyage of the galleon. The difficulty was to find the money, since a careful exploration would entail considerable additional expense. It was arranged, however, with the consent of the government in Spain, that a private individual should supply the funds, in return for which he was to receive concessions enabling him to make a profit on his venture. Accordingly, in 1594, Sebastián Rod-

ríguez Cermenho,² a Portuguese, was selected to command the Manila ship. According to Velasco he was "a man of experience in his calling, one who can be depended upon and who has means of his own." Apparently he was well acquainted with the galleon route, for he seems to have been pilot of the ill fated *Santa Ana* when Cavendish took it. Rodríguez was given permission to ship a number of tons of cloth at Manila on the galleon, thus receiving the benefit of the freight-money. The wisdom of the decision to know and perhaps occupy the Californias seemed clear when news came to New Spain, late in 1594, that Richard Hawkins in an English ship had broken into the Pacific some time before and ravaged the South American coast, though he was captured by the Spaniards in the month of June, not far from Panamá.

On July 5, 1595, Rodríguez Cermenho left Manila in the *San Agustín* for the voyage to the Californias and Acapulco, and November 4 first sighted the coast in about 42°, according to his own account, but in fact farther south, probably a little north of Eureka, about 41°. He now proceeded along the coast, taking soundings and looking for a suitable port except at night, when he deemed it wise to run to sea. On the 5th he passed Cape Mendocino. That day and night they experienced a terrific storm, which left the *San Agustín* in such bad shape that several of the officers petitioned Rodríguez to veer away from the coast and head at once for Acapulco, giving up the plan for the discoveries. Rodríguez would not hear of it, however, and turned the vessel toward the shore. About noon of the same day the sailors at the mast-head caught sight of Drake's Bay behind Point Reyes, whereupon the ship was steered in that direction and came to anchor in the bay. Rodríguez named this port the Bay of San Francisco, although he and his men also called it Bahía Grande (Great Bay).

The narrative of Rodríguez's sojourn at Drake's Bay, from November 6 to December 8, compares in interest with that of Drake, and indeed much more precise information was given about the country for some three or four leagues into the interior from the place where the Spaniards landed. The Indians were almost equally as friendly as in the time of Drake, and the country impressed the various witnesses who expressed themselves about it as

²The mother's name, Cermenho (by which he is more often called), is usually written in Spanish form as Cermeño. Cermeñon and Sermeño are also of occasional use.

very much like Castile. The Spanish accounts also tell of the great number of deer (which seemed to them of unusually large size) and partridges (probably the "conies" of Drake's narrative) that they saw. Rodríguez's long stay was occasioned by his plan to explore the shore in a smaller vessel which he built there, leaving the galleon to keep farther off the coast in the safer waters of the deep. In the light of what happened it was fortunate that he had decided upon this course, for on November 30 the *San Agustín* was driven on shore and wrecked. Only two men seem to have met death, but most of the cargo and all of the provisions were lost. It would be interesting to have more details of this disaster, but the narratives of the voyage which have thus far been found are singularly reticent on this score. The launch, or open sailboat, which they were building was nearly completed; so they were saved a delay in their departure which otherwise would have cost them their lives. It was pressingly urgent, however, that they should procure supplies, for there were seventy mouths to feed. Rodríguez therefore made two expeditions inland, and obtained provisions from the Indians, mostly acorns, which (though bitter to the taste) kept them from starving. On one occasion Rodríguez went to a village to recover some timbers which the natives had procured from the wreck of the ship. The Indians showed fight, sending a shower of arrows against the Spaniards which wounded one man. Then they fled, and Rodríguez and his men plundered the village, getting a great booty in acorns. Later, the Indians repented, and made a gift of further supplies.

On December 8, 1595, Rodríguez left Drake's Bay on the *San Buenaventura*, the launch he had constructed. Seventy men and a store of clothes and stuffs saved from the galleon (to use in barter with the Indians) were crowded into the tiny ship. He headed south for some small barren islands (the Farallones) that he had seen before, and "passed near the said barren islands on the land side about a league or more from shore."³ Yet he saw nothing of San Francisco Bay.

On the 10th he passed Monterey Bay, which he called the Bay of San Pedro. In the afternoon of the 12th the *San Buenaventura* came upon a village along the Santa Barbara Channel. The men

³In his report of April 24, 1596, Rodríguez puts it this way: "I passed near the said barren islands and near the land about a league away, more or less."

called to the natives on shore that they were "*crístianos*" (Christians), whereupon one native caught up the cry, shouting in a loud voice "*Cristianos! Cristianos!*" and straightway came out to them on a raft. Rodríguez gave him a woolen blanket and some taffeta. Soon a number of other Indians came. The Spaniards made signs that they were hungry, wherefore the Indians returned to shore and brought back some bitter acorns and a kind of acorn mush. This they offered in exchange for some of the goods in the *San Buenaventura's* store. Indeed, said Rodríguez, "this people seems to be somewhat avaricious, for after we had given them pieces of taffeta and satin and woolen blankets they asked for more." Thus early were the Santa Barbara Indians displaying those qualities which in later years caused the Spaniards to call them "the Chinamen of California," because of their fondness for driving a good bargain. In the course of the conversation with them, such as it was (for neither party understood the language of the other), some of the Indians said "Mexico! Mexico!" It would be interesting to know whether their knowledge of that land had come down to them from the Rodríguez-Cabrillo-Ferrello voyage of more than fifty years before, or from some overland communication, or indeed from some other crew of seamen whose visit to California is as yet unknown.

Meanwhile Rodríguez had been making careful surveys of the coast, in accordance with his instructions. The sailors and passengers were now sick and weak from lack of food, for they had been subsisting on acorns only. So on the 13th they joined in asking Rodríguez to desist from making further discoveries and to sail with all possible speed for a land where they might procure food. But Rodríguez put them off with fair words, and continued to run the coast in search of information. If the account is true, he must indeed have been a brave man of commanding personality to hold out against starving men in an age of violence; at any rate, he proceeded in ensuing days to make his observations as before. To satisfy their hunger the Spaniards killed a dog they had with them, cooked him, and ate him, even to the very skin. This was on the 13th. On the 14th they passed near Catalina Island, where two Indians came aboard and gave them ten or twelve fish and a seal. Rodríguez made them a present of some silk and woolen blankets, intimating to them, as best he

could, that they should bring more food in exchange for these goods. The Indians went away and returned again, but brought nothing to eat with them. Nevertheless the Spaniards were able this day to catch about thirty fish, all of which they ate. From there they sailed to San Clemente Island, which they reached that night. Going toward the mainland again, on the 15th, they came to Point Loma and San Diego Bay, which had been named, apparently on some previous voyage, the Bay of Pescadores (Fishermen). They did not stop, however, but made a two-day run down the coast.

On the 17th they came to a large island, probably the one known today as San Martín Island in $30^{\circ} 29'$ near the Baja California coast.⁴ The island seemed to have been known to Rodríguez before, and is referred to by him as San Agustín. The Spaniards now had neither food nor drink; so a party was landed to see what they could find. They brought back some bread which the Indians of that place had cooked, made out of a root resembling the sweet potato, but this made the Spaniards sick when they ate it. Driven from the southern part of the island by a strong wind, they went to the northern end for shelter. Here they made a discovery which very probably saved their lives. As Rodríguez puts it:

We went on shore and found many wild onions and prickly-pear trees (*nopales*), and likewise God willed that we should find a dead fish among the rocks, with two mortal wounds, and it was so large that the seventy of us sustained ourselves on it for more than a week, and if it had not been so large we would have perished there of hunger.

There was still no water, but here, too, the miracle occurred. "God was pleased" to send a wind that night which caused them to leave their anchorage and run down the island more than four leagues, where they entered a small but safe bay. There they found a stream of good water, which descended from the mountains of the island. It was two days more before the wind died down sufficiently for them to return to the northern end. There they picked up some thirty companions who had been left there to roast the big fish and guard it.

⁴Rodríguez described this island as running from northwest to southeast, eight or nine leagues long by four wide and in $31^{\circ} 15'$ at its northwestern point.

On December 22, having taken on board plenty of water and the remainder of the big fish, Rodríguez set sail in search of Cerros Island. The sailors and passengers with him were now so sick and weak, some of them at the point of death, that Rodríguez acceded to their requests that he should no longer stop to make observations of the coast, which from this point on was quite well known to Spanish navigators, anyway. So he hastened on as fast as possible, and on January 7, 1596, came to anchor in the port of Navidad, New Spain. Here most of the men, Rodríguez among them, disembarked in order to restore their shattered health. The launch was despatched under Juan de Morgaña (one of Rodríguez's officers), with a crew of ten men, to Acapulco, where it arrived on January 31. Rodríguez made his way to Mexico City, at which place, on April 24, 1596, he penned his official report.

Unfortunately for the reputation of this mariner there was an aftermath to the voyage. To the merchants of New Spain and, to a certain extent, to the authorities, the outstanding fact was the loss of the *San Agustín* and its cargo, and proceedings were instituted to determine who was at fault. The officers endeavored to inculcate one another, and, furthermore, when Rodríguez and two others were questioned by the viceroy about the discoveries along the Alta California coast they did not agree in all particulars. In a letter to the king, dated April 19, 1596, the viceroy (the Conde de Monterey, who had succeeded Velasco in 1595) expressed himself as follows:

To me there seems to be convincing proof, resting on clear inference, that some of the principal bays, where with greater reason it might be expected harbors would be found, they crossed from point to point and by night, while others they entered but a little way. For all this a strong incentive must have existed, because of the hunger and illness they say they experienced, which would cause them to hasten on their voyage. Thus, I take it, as to this exploration the intention of Your Majesty has not been carried into effect. It is the general opinion that this enterprise should not be attempted on the return voyage from the islands and with a laden ship, but from this coast and by constantly following along it.

Thus did Rodríguez Cermenho fail of the glory to which he was entitled, and he was saved from oblivion only through the notoriety of having lost his ship. Yet, those who have read his report

will recognize that he gave a very good description of the Alta California coast; it is almost always possible to tell just where he was from the account he gave,—and this is something that can not be said for some other more famous navigators. His voyage did have a real importance, however. As indicated in the Conde de Monterey's letter, cited above, the opinion became general that it would be better to explore the Californias by a voyage direct from New Spain, in boats of light draught, instead of relying upon the galleon for this purpose. The new idea was very soon to be acted upon.⁵

⁵For the Rodríguez Cermenho voyage, transcripts (in the Bancroft Library) from the following documents of the Archivo General de Indias of Seville, Spain, were used:

1. 1595. November 30-December 9. Drake's Bay. Pedro de Lugo. Información sobre la calidad de la tierra que se vido en el Puerto que se tomó.

Copy. Transcript 15 pp. long-hand. Legajo 58-3-12. Testimony taken by the notary Lugo of Rodríguez and others about the land at Drake's Bay and for three or four leagues inland. Dated (in Mexico) 1596.

2. (1596. January Navidad). Pedro de Lugo. Sworn testimony of Rodríguez before the notary Lugo of his discoveries in the Californias from the first day that he sighted the coast until his arrival at Cerros Island].

Original. Transcript 16 pp. typed. Legajo 58-3-12.

3. 1596. Apr. 24. Mexico. Sebastián Rodríguez Cermenho. Derrotero y relación del descubrimiento que hizo el Capitán y Piloto mayor Sebastián Rz. Cermenho, por orden de su magestad, hasta la Isla de Cedros. Original. Transcript 21 pp. long-hand. Legajo 58-3-16.

These three documents tell much the same story, but they are not identical. Taken with other materials in the Bancroft Library they should one day be the basis for a substantial thesis. Except for a brief and somewhat mistaken note in Richman, they have never been utilized before. In addition, the following items were used:

1. *Documents from the Suro collection*, orig. Sp. and tr. ed. by George Butler Griffin in Historical Society of Southern California, *Publications*, II, pt. I, Los Angeles. 1891. Fifteen of the nineteen documents range in date from 1584 to 1603. Ten of them were made use of in this chapter.

2. *Documentos referentes al reconocimiento de las costas de las Californias desde el Cabo de San Lucas al de Mendocino*, ed. by Francisco Carrasco y Guisasaola. Madrid. 1882. This contains forty-four documents ranging in date from 1584 to 1609. Many of the more important appear in item 1 above. Some of the others were also used.